

JUNE 2007

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# sky

DELTA



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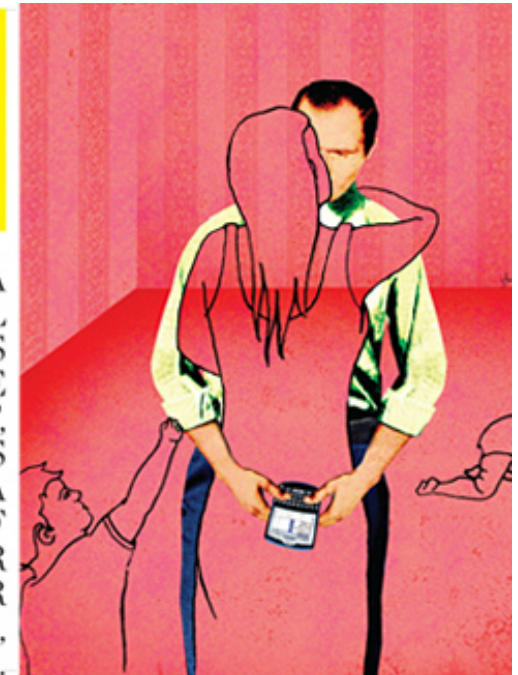
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## WHY AM I LEADING THE CRACKBERRY LIFE?

THOUGHT LEADER

IT CAN TRANSFORM YOU INTO AN 11TH-HOUR SUPERHERO AT WORK BY HALTING A CRISIS IN ITS TRACKS. IT CAN UNRAVEL YOUR MARRIAGE AND TURN YOUR KIDS INTO SULLEN STRANGERS. IT CAN MAKE YOU FEEL NEEDED AND IMPORTANT, OR WEAR YOU DOWN TO A NUB. IT HAS ITS VERY OWN PHYSICAL-TRAUMA SYNDROME AND 12-STEP PROGRAM. IF YOU HAVE ONE, YOU LOVE IT. IF YOUR SPOUSE HAS ONE, YOU HATE IT. FOR SOME, A BLACKBERRY IS A LIBERATOR, FOR OTHERS, A BALL AND CHAIN.

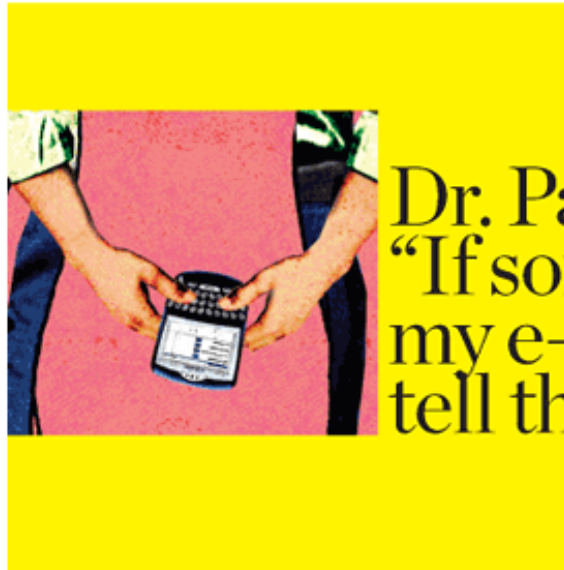


HELLO, MY NAME IS SUSAN CRANDELL, AND I'M *NOT* A CRACKBERRY ADDICT. BUT THAT'S WHAT THEY ALL SAID, ONE AFTER ANOTHER, AS I INTERVIEWED HARDENED BLAKBERRY USERS WHOSE THUMBS WERE PROBABLY DANCING ACROSS THE KEYBOARD EVEN AS THEY WERE TALKING TO ME.

# h

ARD TOBELIEVE that the BlackBerry smartphone has been around only since 1999, its reputation looms so large. Like Kleenex, it's a brand name turned generic, the descriptor for the entire industry of handheld digital devices that deliver our e-mails and calls and keep our contact lists complete and our schedules on track. And rightly so, since the BlackBerry leads sales in its category, with a record 3.5 million shipped last year out of 17.7 million devices sold. It's the poster child for the technological revolution, and the whipping boy for its excesses. When's the last time you heard someone say

“smartphone” or “personal digital assistant”? Whatever the make and model, in the common parlance, it’s a BlackBerry. The BlackBerry is continually popping up in the news, crowning mini media celebrities in its wake. A Chicago hotel executive lands a flurry of TV and radio interviews when he launches a service that locks guests’ handhelds in the hotel safe. An executive coach in Pennsylvania announces a 12-step program to get your e-mail habit under control, citing a client who had 3,600 messages in his in-box. A sheriff in Cole County, Missouri, earns his 15 minutes of fame by setting up a system whereby hearing-impaired people can contact his department via BlackBerry or other cellular service in an emergency. The “Today” show puts the managing editor of *Forbes* on a techno-blackout for a week, and you can feel his pain. The American Society of Hand Therapists issues an alert that handheld electronics can cause carpal tunnel syndrome and tendinitis, repetitive stress injuries that are instantly dubbed “BlackBerry thumb.” A Rutgers professor predicts lawsuits brought by stressed-out, BlackBerry-addicted users against their employers.



Dr. Pamela Peeke says,  
“If somebody answers  
my e-mail at 3 a.m., I  
tell them, ‘Get a life.’”

I exited the fast lane, leaving my corporate job just as the BlackBerry was roaring up the entrance ramp. My boss had one, but I didn’t, and every time I received a message from him with that little “Sent from my BlackBerry Wireless Device” subscript, I’d think, “Showoff!” Now, as a freelance writer, I live the life of a technological cave woman, with a laptop I don’t even take on trips. But I’m fascinated by the BlackBerry, its cultural ubiquity and the big emotions this pint-size device elicits. As I call around the country, I discover its oversize reputation is well-earned. Anyone who is anyone has one, and they all want to talk about it.

Here’s what I learn: Users concede there’s widespread BlackBerry abuse, but the addict, proverbially, is always somebody else. You’ve heard of victimless crime? This may be the first perp-less crime. In dozens of interviews I find only two BlackBerry users who have called it quits. The spouses are a different story. They’ve laid down demands, set zones and hours for BlackBerry use, even tossed them out the window.

#### **PORTRAIT OF A BLACKBERRIER**

I know my buddy Dr. Pamela Peeke, who lives the frenetic life of a career multitasker, has to be a big-time user, so I call her first. Chief medical correspondent for the Discovery Health Channel, she sees patients in Maryland, is a *New York*

*Times* best-selling author (her latest book, *Fit to Live*, came out last month), teaches, leads fitness retreats and speaks all over the country. If anybody needs a smartphone, it's Pam. Turns out she has a Palm Treo 750 fully loaded, with Bluetooth capabilities. "I can't be away from it," she says. "I once dropped the Treo into a pedicure bath. There it was whirling around in the water, and I wanted to call 911. Total panic."

Pam is the only self-proclaimed addict I talk to, and even she has no wish to enter recovery. Her smartphone allows her to keep up with her patients when she's traveling and stay in touch with her husband back home. She can make fun of herself—"The greatest . . . experience of life is a clean in-box"—but she's a happy camper.

Like Pam, 90 percent of BlackBerry users consider their handset vital to business, and more than two-thirds say it "improves their status and makes them look more professional," according to a study commissioned by T-Mobile, findings that concur with my less-than-scientific phone research.

Mike Geylin, who owns a public relations company in New Jersey, is a believer. "I'm a small firm looking for an edge," he says. "A smartphone is an enabler. It cuts down on my time at work. And I can communicate instantaneously with my daughter who's studying in Argentina without bankrupting the family."

Lisa Behnke's BlackBerry helps her stay in touch while telecommuting. She works on site at a Minneapolis insurance company and from her Miami home on alternate weeks. "I mostly love my BlackBerry," she says. "It's very freeing to know what isn't happening. If I weren't connected, I'd worry." The value of "knowing your devils" is echoed by other BlackBerryers. Not so, says Robert Leahy, Ph.D., director of The American Institute for Cognitive Therapy and author of *The Worry Cure*. "When you're tethered to your BlackBerry, you're anxious because you're waiting for the next call to come in," he says.

### **"I CAN STOP ANYTIME"**

Google "BlackBerry addiction" and you'll get more than a million hits—newspaper articles, Web sites of TV news shows, rosters of symptoms on BlackBerry-user sites. Is this a bona fide syndrome or a media creation?

Jeff Klein is on his fifth BlackBerry. Whenever a new model comes out, Klein gets it and sells his old one on eBay.

In charge of fund-raising at The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center in New York, Klein doesn't call himself an addict, though he does tell a story on himself: "I remarked to a friend who's in AA how strange it is that people talk about BlackBerry addiction, and he pointed out that a lot of the phrasing I was using is what alcoholics say right before they go to AA: My friends think it's a problem, but I don't. . . . It affects every aspect of my life, but I don't think that's a bad thing. . . . It affects relationships negatively, but it helps in so many other ways. . . ."

Leahy agrees that BlackBerry abuse has some of the hallmarks of addiction. "As with addiction, people minimize the effect on others—you're not lying in the gutter with your BlackBerry—but I look at it as obsessive-compulsive disorder [OCD]," he says. "You have overvaluation of your messages, intolerance of uncertainty—not knowing what the messages are—a sense of urgency, and catastrophic predictions about what will happen if you don't answer a message. That magical thinking is very OCD: 'If I don't get a message immediately, things will unravel.'"

Leahy has treated a number of people suffering the BlackBerry blues: "I had one patient, very successful in finance, who said, 'If I'm not immediately available to everyone at all times, they won't need me and they'll get rid of me.' That's a slippery slope to nowhere." Talking about the inflated sense of importance a handheld can confer, he describes another patient, a law-firm associate: "He believes that because he is there all the time, he is The Man." Leahy had this same patient consider his colleagues who weren't available 24/7 but whose careers are progressing just fine. "If your management would fire competent people because they're not available to e-mail at 2 a.m., maybe you should go to

Guantanamo,” Leahy says. “They treat you better.”

No question—smartphones can be addictive, says Gayle Porter, an associate professor of management at the Rutgers University School of Business in New Jersey. She’s been studying workaholics for 20 years, and foresees potential legal action against companies that encourage 24/7 use. “Imagine this scenario,” she says. “My kids don’t know me, I’m getting divorced, I have neck problems and BlackBerry thumb. If people’s lives become messed up because of addiction to technology, they’ll look for someone to blame.” Citing lawsuits for other ill effects of work stress, she says, “It’s only a matter of time before companies are facing liability claims.”

### **COLLATERAL DAMAGE: THE SPOUSE**

If users consider the BlackBerry a small miracle, to spouses it’s a curse. Katie Herrick, online editor of *The Nest*, wrote about the detox program she put her husband on. “His BlackBerry is a fidget, something he does when he’s bored, watching TV,” she says. “Half the time, it isn’t even work. He’s e-mailing with his friends or trying to beat his best score on BrickBreaker.”

The showdown came on a road trip to visit her parents. “Scott was reading e-mails while driving. After the trip, I blogged about it, wondering how I could get him to stop. So many people responded that I did an article on test-driving their techniques.” Nowadays, the BlackBerry sits on a table by the front door, and Scott has agreed not to use it while driving. Sometimes, the answer to conjugal bliss is paradoxical: another BlackBerry. Peter Land, an executive at a marketing and communications company, a BlackBerry for five years, has endured criticism from his wife and children. “You hate it until you love it,” he says, reporting that arguments ended the day his wife got her own. “Now she’s on it more than I am.” Dan Johnston, who works for a European car manufacturer, says, “I’m on mine 24/7. My bill typically runs \$400 a month. My wife complains that I use it too much, but she has one, too. I’m the bigger user, but I catch her sneaking e-mails. She’s a closet user.”

Another auto executive, Wade Hoyt, has the simplest spouse relations plan: “I don’t use it in sight of my wife.”

### **Cold Turkey**

Rick Ueno, general manager of the Sheraton Chicago Hotel & Towers, is one of the few recovering users I found. “When you first get a BlackBerry, you are ecstatic,” he says. “But then it’s overload. I got so obsessive, I lost my connection with people. It was driving my wife crazy. We were going to Maui for my son’s spring break. I knew I’d sit on the beach checking e-mail, so I just quit.” He’s been BlackBerry-free for a year, and reports that he’s just as effective, more creative and a lot happier. “I used to get 400 messages a day; now I get 80,” he says. “My staff is thrilled. They hated all those e-mails from me.”

Buoyed by his experience, Ueno launched a BlackBerry check-in program at his hotel a year ago. Only two guests have taken him up on the offer to lock their smartphones in his safe, but he hears tales of woe from lots of other guests, including a secretary who called begging him to confiscate her boss’s BlackBerry. (The boss refused.)

Tina Georgeou has also stepped away from the smartphone. She was such a dedicated user that she spent a day in the hospital in labor on her BlackBerry. “On maternity leave, I was constantly running to the window of our house in Connecticut because that’s where the wireless signal was strongest,” she says. “I’d be holding the baby in one arm, the BlackBerry in the other. My husband finally said, ‘If you don’t put it down, I’m going to throw it out.’” When Tina opted not to go back to her job as a vice president at a Midwest publishing company, she turned in her BlackBerry. Now she consults for a variety of nonprofit and other organizations and hasn’t re-equipped, but she’ll never say never. “We just

updated our cellphone, and I considered a BlackBerry. Just holding one, a shiver went down my back. It's like being a smoker and quitting. I can't have one, or I'll be right back." (At this writing, Tina is still clean.)

### **BLACKBERRY ETIQUETTE**

Most of the people I've talked to are midlifers, established in their families and careers. I wonder if the younger generation, who were punching computer keys before they could recite the alphabet, have a different perspective on BlackBerry use and misuse. I check in with my daughter's former college roommate, now an associate with a Boston law firm. I figure Jennie is BlackBerryed up, since I once watched Jennie and Brook sit back-to-back in their dorm room instant-messaging each other. Yes, indeed; Jennie's a 24/7 user. "Being constantly connected is a blessing and a curse," she says. "I can sneak out of the office to take care of business. I had a physical-therapy appointment this morning (not BlackBerry thumb!), and I was e-mailing a client during my treatment." The curse comes in the early hours. "I was working on a time-sensitive memo at home one night and checked my BlackBerry at 1 a.m. when I was finally going to bed. I had an e-mail from a partner asking for status. I wrote a summary and sent it at 2. When I got up at 5, there was another e-mail from him at 4:45. As a low-level associate, I'm expected to be obsessive. But it's also part of my personality. The minute I see it flash, I have to check it.

"I try to be good, though, and not whip it out with friends," she says, noting that she's been on the receiving end of BlackBerry bad manners. "A mortgage broker who asked me to dinner had it out on the table in the restaurant, checking messages, taking calls. It was mortifying. First and last date." In general, though, she says, "My generation is more forgiving of the excesses."

"A social crutch" is how Rick Ueno characterizes the BlackBerry. "You go into an unfamiliar setting and you have something to do instead of saying hello to a new person." Robert Leahy agrees: "You stick to the safety of conversations or e-mails with people you know, rather than meeting someone new. You have to ask yourself to what extent you're using this as a distraction from interacting with other people."

Indeed, many users seem oblivious to the people around them, like the row of women getting pedicures, every last one of them talking or typing on a handheld. Or the school meeting where all the moms are thumbing away at their handhelds instead of stuffing envelopes for the fund drive. I hear about furtive e-mailing in movie theaters, concert halls and at baseball games. Peter Land tells me that "If I see somebody looking down at a meeting, I'll confiscate the BlackBerry," though he admits, "I'm an abuser myself."

### **Setting Ground Rules**

The BlackBerry is like the little girl with the curl. When it is good, it is very good. And when it is bad it is horrid. What makes the difference? Ground rules.

My multitasking medical friend, Pamela Peeke, says, "If somebody answers my e-mail at 3 a.m., I tell them, 'Get a life.'" That's a personal-sanity ground rule. Leahy, who urges users to "talk about the BlackBerry behind its back," has another one for marital health: "Do a hierarchical family chart. If the BlackBerry is on top, the wife's on the bottom and the kids aren't even on the chart, something's got to change."

"Tell your spouse not just that the BlackBerry use is bothering you, but why," encourages Katie Herrick, whose husband's handheld had become "the third partner in our marriage."

Driving while BlackBerrying is so insane it shouldn't need a mention. But *The Wall Street Journal* suggests that it does.

The *Journal* reported in March that driving while texting caused a five-vehicle pileup outside Seattle, and also contributed to the death of a Tennessee man who lost control of his pickup. A stunning 19 percent of drivers text-message while driving, according to a survey by Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company. Three states—Washington, Oregon and New Jersey—are considering legislation to levy fines for or to ban DWT. Don't do it. Period.

Perhaps the golden rule is to remember that the BlackBerry is a tool, your tool. Otherwise, as Wade Hoyt, who uses his BlackBerry to manage the time difference between his office and company headquarters on the West Coast, puts it, "It's a bit like owning a cat. You don't know who's in charge."

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*Susan Crandell is the author of Thinking About Tomorrow: Reinventing Yourself at Midlife (Warner Wellness).*

Illustration by BRIAN STAUFFER



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